Focus On...

Dan Farrow/NOAA

Volunteers Miguel Lugo (left) and Becca Newhall secure the NOAA vessel Alosid to the offshore oyster reef they are standing on so they and other volunteers can seed the reef with bags of native oyster shells and spat.

Alison Hammer/NOAA

Volunteers wade into Chesapeake Bay with tubs of bay grasses they grew in their offices. The grasses will provide cover and food for small animals and help reduce erosion.

NOAA Volunteers Helping Restore Chesapeake Bay

—By Alison Hammer

On June 15, over 90 NOAA volunteers from Silver Spring, Md., waded into the warm, murky waters of Chesapeake Bay, some getting wet up to their necks, to plant underwater bay grasses. In all, volunteers planted 45 trays of bay grass they cultivated in 15 grow tanks distributed throughout their Silver Spring offices.

Bay grasses provide important food and habitat for fish, shellfish and waterfowl and help keep water clean.

The volunteers also planted over 1,000 plants on land bordering the bay, which will help stabilize the soil and provide cover for terrapins and other small animals, installed 45 feet of coir fiber logs to reinforce the shoreline, sprinkled oyster shell and spat on an off-shore oyster reef from a boat, built a floating dock and removed debris from Hurricane Isabel.

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Alison Hammer/NOAA

Peter Bergstrom explains the bay grass planting process to volunteers.

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This was the third year NOAA volunteers gathered at the Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center, a scenic 500-acre nature preserve consisting of a marshy wetland and woodlands surrounded by bay waters, located about five miles from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge on Maryland's eastern shore.

The wide-ranging restoration work by volunteers from all NOAA line offices this year builds on the work of a much smaller group of volunteers from the Special Projects Office of NOAA's National Ocean Service who planted bay grasses at the site the past two years.

Restoration of the site grew out of a partnership between the Special Projects Office, the NOAA Restoration Center and the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office. It supplements on-going work by NOAA to restore Chesapeake Bay, which is severely degraded due to human impacts.

In 2002, the NOAA Restoration Center restored 400 feet of shoreline by creating two acres of tidal wetlands that serve as a nursery for fish, crabs, terrapins and horseshoe crabs. Center staff also built a 600-foot-long breakwater offshore to protect the shoreline and create additional habitat.

Jeff Shenot/NOAA

NOAA volunteers learn about the importance of protecting diamondback terrapins in the Chesapeake Bay watershed from University of Maryland student interns.

Since then, staff from the NOAA Restoration Center, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center have been monitoring conditions at the site.

When Hurricane Isabel hit the bay in September 2003, a seven-foot-high tidal surge flooded the entire shoreline and destroyed a house and trailer at the site. But the hurricane moved very little sediment and uprooted only a few plants.

In addition to helping restore the bay, the event was an opportunity for NOAA staff to get out of their offices and perform some hands-on field work.

"NOAA has served in a leadership role in accomplishing significant coastal restoration activities throughout the nation, especially supporting the restoration of the Chesapeake Bay," NOAA Fisheries head William Hogarth told volunteers. "Here is an opportunity for NOAA headquarters staff from different offices to interact, learn new skills and have fun while working side-by-side in a natural setting."

Peter Bergstrom/NOAA

Volunteers (front to back) Tisa Shostik, Marti McQuire and Liz Fairey plant wetland plants near a coir fiber log that volunteers installed earlier in the day to help limit shoreline erosion.